

f—Période moderne

THE SOCIO-ECONOMIC CONDITIONS IN
NEW JULFA POST-1650:
THE IMPACT OF CONVERSIONS TO ISLAM
ON INTERNATIONAL TRADE.

by

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The social and economic conditions which drove many Armenian merchants to desert their homes in the suburb of New Julfa in Safavid Iran at the end of the seventeenth century deserve closer study. Although the few extant scholarly works on the prosperous suburb of New Julfa invariably refer to the onset of religious tension at the end of the century, none explore the impact of conversions on the wealthy community. Many sources provide vivid passages which remain unexploited. Among the subjects most neglected is conversion to Islam, which emerges as a formidable challenge to the community and a major aspect of daily life in New Julfa mid-century onwards. Unlike Armenian communities elsewhere, such as the community of Poland in the seventeenth century, which was united with the Roman Catholic Church, the majority of the New Julfa population remained affiliated to the Armenian Apostolic Church¹. While episodes of forced conversions among other Armenian groups within Iran also remain to be studied, the New Julfa community, privileged and exempt from persecution, has not even been considered for conversions to Islam.

We have argued elsewhere that at the end of the century Armenian international trade in silk and silver was the envy of the European East India Companies²; and it has been assumed without exception, that the

¹ GHOU GASSIAN's 1995 study on the diocese of New Julfa finds that there are very few Catholics in the suburb.

² BAGHDIA NTZ 1993.

religious tensions at the end of the century, beginning with the reign of Shāh Sulaymān, were responsible for the decline of that lucrative commerce. The following article explores the circumstances surrounding the voluntary conversion to Islam of the highest ranking merchants in New Julfa and their consequences on trade. It demonstrates that religious tension began much earlier, mid-century, at a time when New Julfa remained prosperous and that many other factors in the decline of New Julfa's trade have been neglected.

Although conversion to Islam had been a constant since the Armenians entered Iranian territory, as the fate of the 20,000 Armenians *ghulāms* who joined Shāh 'Abbās I's army³ attests the New Julfa community was granted the rare privilege of religious freedom. Mid-century one⁴ begins to see converts to Islam from among its notables. This seems to contradict the widely held notion that religious tensions began after the reign of Shāh 'Abbās II (1642-1666). Prior to this article, all serious studies on New Julfa—including my own—have held to this belief, based on the first history of New Julfa, written by Tēr Yovhaneanc'. Furthermore there are links between religious conversions to Islam and to Catholicism which emerge that have remained completely unnoticed. Conversion among the wealthy remains a very different case given the initial freedom granted New Julfa. None of the conversions seem directly a result of force; some are totally voluntary, others are results of the socio-economic pressures of life in New Julfa. The Diocese of New Julfa itself has only recently been an object of first study, so it is not surprising to note the many aspects of life in the suburb that remain to be explored⁵. Most works⁶, including my own previous research, portray the period under Shāh 'Abbās II (1642-66) as a period of prolonged serenity. A closer inquiry shows that it is during this period that the religious strife which incited infighting in New Julfa and affected its trade began. It is hoped that this article will demonstrate that the 1650s, although prosperous, were a turning point for the merchants of the suburb—just as it was for other minorities in Iran.

A major problem facing scholars studying this period is that most of the basic work on the Safavids still remains to be done. Luckily, in the two decades since the Iranian revolution, Safavid studies are progressing

³ SAVORY 1993.

⁴ BAGHDIA NTZ 1993 chapter I.

⁵ GHOUGASSIAN's 1995.

⁶ FERRIER 1996, GREGORIAN 1974, BAGHDIA NTZ 1993, GHOUGASSIAN 1995 are examples.

thanks to the efforts of many scholars. The new work accomplished by Iranists is of utmost importance to the history of New Julfa. A recent study of the politics of the spiritual and temporal aspects of the Safavid period, based on Persian chronicles, dispels the image of Oriental despotism propagated by the European travel accounts. It demonstrates the constant fluctuations of balance among the many elements of which Safavid power was constituted⁷. Of particular interest to the study of the status of minorities such as the Armenians is a thorough analysis of the changes in religious climate in the seventeenth century. There is also some careful work on other minorities, the Jews of Isfahan for example, by Vera Moreen⁸.

A second problem is a consequence of the nature of the sources which provide information on conversion to Islam. Therefore, a word of caution on the authors of the sources remains crucial. Here we have no choice but to rely on the biased works of Catholic missionaries and on the travelers. Save for Ārak'el of Tabriz's history, other Armenian and Persian sources do not contain the socio-economic details necessary for our analysis. The Persian chronicles do not give any social information about the Armenians⁹. Ārak'el also remains heavily biased: he is an Armenian ecclesiastic, closely tied to the Kat'ofikos in Ejmiāč'in who has sent him to New Julfa and commissioned his work. Ārak'el's attitude toward the Persian conquerors is not kindly, and his attitude to Islam is even less objective than that of the European missionaries, given the threat of conversion among the Armenians under Iranian rule. Many authors are therefore reluctant to believe or write of the possibility of a voluntary conversion.

Shāh 'Abbās the Second's reign (1642-1666) was not one that should be remembered for religious tolerance toward minorities, although that misconception persists. The political and religious climate of his reign has been meticulously studied by K. Babayan¹⁰. An episode analyzed by Prof. Babayan, and found in the works of Jean Chardin, is of particular interest to the political position of New Julfa: the struggle for power during the three first years of accession which resulted in the murder of the Grand Vizier allied with the King's mother Ānā Khānum. Ānā Khānum and her faction of the harem allied to the Grand Vizier Sārū Taqī held virtually all power until the Shāh, at age twelve (in 1645) decided to enter the political arena by having Sārū Taqī mur-

⁷ BABAYAN 1993.

⁸ MOREEN, 1981 for a general view but especially BASCH MOREEN, 1987.

⁹ BABAYAN, personal communication, 1996.

¹⁰ BABAYAN 1993.

dered¹¹. The young Shāh also had his Grandmother, mother of Shāh Safī, poisoned¹². The Queen Mother, Ānā Khānum, expressed great anger at the first murder. The assassination was then justified to her by exposing Sārū Taqī's corruption in collecting dues from New Julfa. The revenues from the Armenian suburb belonged to her. Chardin writes: "Il disoit cela pour piquer davantage la reine-mère: parce que le revenu de ce faubourg est dans l'apanage des mères du roi et qu'on ne peut lever un sou sans leur ordre."¹³ The reason for us to dwell on this episode is to point out that Ānā Khānum, like her predecessors, patron and protector of New Julfa, was part of a losing political faction. With the poisoning of Shāh Safī's mother, she remained New Julfa's sole legal recourse to the Persian court. As many passages in the *Chronicle of Carmelites* and other sources attest, petitions to the Persian court by the Armenians of New Julfa passed via the mediation of the Shāh's mother¹⁴. With the appointment of Sultān al-'Ulamā' as Grand Vizier, the balance of power changes with a large portion of the power going to the Tajik or Iranian element composed of 'ulamā' and bureaucrats¹⁵. It seems clear to the present writer that the succeeding Grand Vizier would not have the interests of members of the preceding faction at heart. Her interests and New Julfa's were closely linked and her weakened political position should be noted as it undoubtedly affected the amount of protection the suburb would receive.

The most important element for our purposes which emerges from Kathryn Babayan's careful study of the ideological currents of this period is the growing power of the *sharī'a*-minded Tajik 'ulamā'. Their influence at court would of course make policy, often erroneously attributed to the Shāh himself because of the prevailing belief in the extreme absolutism that characterized Persian Shāhs in the eyes of foreign observers. Even the Carmelites of Isfahan, mostly oblivious to the evolution of Safavid policy, uncharacteristically realized this new element when they wrote: "Things are not going well at present for the poor Armenian and Syrian Christians, because a new Grand Vizier [*i'timād al-daulah*] has been made a bigoted Mohammadan and antagonistic to Christians."¹⁶ The missionary neither names the official (which we have

¹¹ BABAYAN 1993 pp. 125-27 and *CHOC* vol. 1 p. 353.

¹² *CHOC*, vol. 1, p. 353 there is some controversy about this second murder.

¹³ CHARDIN, éd. 1811, p. 315 cited and analyzed in BABAYAN 1993 p. 127.

¹⁴ There are many examples but to verify the continuity of this custom a good example for the end of the century is cited in *CHOC* vol. 1 pp. 466-468.

¹⁵ BABAYAN 1993 p. 129.

¹⁶ *CHOC* vol 1 p. 353.

named above) nor notices the change in balance of power which this new Grand Vizier inaugurates, the aim of the author is fulfilled without it: to stress Muslim fanaticism and its threat to the local Christians in order to make the Catholic missionary role more indispensable. Sultān al-‘Ulamā’ was not simply a “bigoted Mohammedan” as the missionary letter implies. He represented an entire political faction whose victory took power away from the *ghulāms*, all converts—like the Queen mother herself, and established the ‘*ulamā*’ and Imamite orthodoxy as the predominant force, which would become stronger as the century progressed¹⁷. It is with this evolution in mind that the religious climate for the Armenian subjects of the Safavids should be studied.

The policies of Shāh ‘Abbās the Second towards the minorities were observed to have been instigated by the above mentioned religious faction¹⁸. This wine-loving Shāh, well known to the Europeans because of Tavernier’s accounts of his long nights drinking¹⁹, banned wine-making in Isfahan and also forbade the drinking of wine by most of his subjects. With the force of this decree, he ordered the Armenians dislodged from the center of Isfahan and moved them into the suburb of New Julfa. Until then New Julfa had been an exclusive suburb. It is well known that wine and stronger spirits were made by the Armenians and by the Jews. The decree accused the Armenians of polluting the waters when making wine, as well as polluting the street waters with washing jugs having previously contained wine²⁰. Arak’el’s commentary on the displacement of the Armenian population of Isfahan into New Julfa is interesting. He believed that it ultimately was the best thing that could have happened, for he thought it would reduced the rate of conversions to Islam among the Isfahani Armenians:

Continuous exposure to the brutal and sensual mores of the Mahometans and their predications turned them away from the principles of Christianity until they ended up renouncing it completely and embracing Islam. Then young Christians were pleasing to Mahometan girls, and young Mahometans courted Christian girls and tried to mate secretly with the sons and

¹⁷ BABAYAN 1993 for this progression read the conclusion.

¹⁸ *CHOC* vol. 1 p. 365.

¹⁹ KROELL 1979. Here is included a letter by DULAURIER DESLANDES describing Tavernier drinking with the Shah and singing the night away to the delight of the Shah who was overcome with laughter. See p. 19. It is mainly through the popularity of the works of Tavernier which know many editions that Shah Abbas is known and much of his reputation as lenient to the Christians and wine loving stems from this traveler’s accounts.

²⁰ This episode is found in many sources ARAK’EL, du MANS p. 143, the Chronicle of Carmelites p. 365. It is also alluded to in the careful description of Isfahan by Chardin, see vol. II of the Amsterdam 1735 edition.

daughters of the Christians, this so effectively that they eventually brought them to convert willingly or reluctantly. We have seen a good number of them pass into Moslem families. When the Christians tried to bring them back they refused to comply... Massed together in the same place they bless God with joy...²¹

Arak'el who was visiting Isfahan in 1657 seems to share the disdainful opinion of Islam found among the French Catholic missionaries. He believes New Julfa exempt from conversion and saw it as a haven against Islam. Around the same time the Armenians were sent into New Julfa, Shāh 'Abbās II also dislodged the Zoroastrians who had a suburb of their own right next to New Julfa, on the same bank of the river. He lodged them at the extremities of New Julfa and converted the Zoroastrian suburb into an elaborate pleasure garden for his court²². This elaborate pleasure garden was among the sites drawn by Gretlot, the artist who accompanied Chardin²³. This garden adjoined New Julfa. It is also at this date that the Jews are all ordered to apostatize²⁴.

New Julfa was not as exempt from religious problems as Arak'el imagined. The first conversions to Islam within the important families of the suburb date from the mid fifties. A letter in the *Chronicle* dated 1652 states: "The brother of the most important Armenian of (New) Julfa has become Muhammedan."²⁵ The same author writes in 1657 of the Shāh:

"Now he is taking up with the Armenians and other Christians wanting all to apostatize. The brother of the Patriarch, who was himself an archbishop has voluntarily become a renegade, and I think this poor Armenian community will in the end have to become Muhammedan... He [the Shah] does not allow them [Armenians] to leave the country...."²⁶

For the Armenians who had always had royal permission to travel to Europe and India for their trade, this was unusual. An explanation for this new attitude from the Persians is Catholic interference in New Julfa. The Persian court regarded it, rightly one might add, as intervention into the internal affairs of Persia by a foreign power. Catholic religious zeal, and some of the overtures made to it by the Armenian themselves, had dire consequences. The attitude towards Catholicism had changed.

²¹ ARAK'EL (this translation is my own; 1990, chap. 33, p. 354).

²² For a descriptions of the suburbs of Isphahan and their locations see volume II of CHARDIN, Amsterdam 1735.

²³ *Ibid.* p. 105, plate XLIX entitled *Seadat Abad*.

²⁴ CHOC vol 1, p. 365 on this see the works of MOREEN (V.).

²⁵ CHOC vol. 1, p. 364.

²⁶ CHOC vol. 1, p. 365.

Under Shāh Safī (1629-1642) there is proof that the Armenians continued to be favorable to Union with Rome, as they also had been under Shāh ‘Abbās I. They give commercial reasons for it. They would have better trading opportunities in Europe if they were Catholic. Shāh ‘Abbās I had second thoughts when the envoys of the Popes awkwardly referred to the Armenians as “their Armenians.” He not only abandoned his initial idea of choosing a Catholic *khalifa* for all his Christian subjects for fear they would become the Pope’s subjects²⁷. He had promulgated a royal decree which forbade the Armenians from visiting the houses of the European religious orders²⁸. Becoming Catholic was viewed as allegiance to a foreign power. An episode of forced conversion to Islam among the Armenians who had borrowed money from the Portuguese to repay their debts to the King makes this clear. The forced conversions which ensued did not concern the inhabitants of New Julfa, but the Shāh’s attitude was clear: such ties with the Catholics were viewed as treason²⁹. It is certain that the Armenians had made serious overtures to Rome. In 1628, after the failure of many previous overtures, they stressed that they ran the “entire silk trade of Persia computed to be worth 6,000,000 in Persian money (save for the part done by the English). They petitioned the Pope to allow them to open establishments in the Papal States for the sale of silk, and to furnish them with letters to the Christian sovereigns with the like end in view. If admitted to the Papal States etc., they promised to live in a Catholic way.”³⁰ It is at this juncture that the Sacred Propaganda Fide made the decision that it would be desirable that Persia should have a Latin Bishop in Persia³¹. Under Shāh Safī, far less diplomatic effort was made by the Shāh towards the Pope than by his predecessor. Hormuz had been taken away from Portugal thanks to English help in 1622, and Catholic presence was waning, but the Armenians continued their overtures to Rome. Shāh Safī’s reign remains a period of high privilege for the Armenians of the suburb with no evidence of retaliation against any inclination some might have had for Union with Rome. In fact the reign of Shāh Safī likely represents a high point for New Julfa: the revolt of Guilan put an end to the royal monopoly on silk, and they were far more autonomous from the court in this trade. In addition enough time had past for them to

²⁷ All this is related at great length and with force of detail on the chapter concerning Shāh ‘Abbās I in *CHOC* vol. 1 pp. 65-306, see especially pp. 205-213.

²⁸ *Ibid.* p. 207.

²⁹ BAGHDIAANTZ 1993, chapter I.

³⁰ *CHOC* vol. 1, p. 295.

³¹ *Ibid.*

be fully established in the suburb, since by then they had built churches and stately houses and did not have to invest as much in infrastructure.

The political climate allowing this privilege changed under his successor ‘Abbās II because of outside interference of Catholicism. The infighting within the church at New Julfa and links to Catholicism in Catholicized Naxiĵewan, could be an explanation for the Shāh’s new suspicions. To understand the origins of the new mistrust felt by the Shāh towards his Armenian subjects, it may help to look into the changes which occurred at the same time; changes within New Julfa itself, and changes in Persia’s foreign policy. One of his less remembered deeds, perhaps the best token of this new mistrust, an act that has gone unnoticed, is that in 1652 ‘Abbās II sent troops to ruin the old city of Julfa again, half a century after the initial deportation³². Therefore, the ruins of old Julfa on the banks of the Araxe as described by Chardin and others in the 1670s were not what Shāh ‘Abbās the Great had left behind—but his great grandson. There is little explanation for this act except to prevent resettlement of the town by returning Armenians. As quoted above, he forbade Armenians from leaving the country for a while. This was unusual. Although no one could travel without royal permission, the Armenians, as chief exporters of persian silk, had been free to travel. Sending troops to old Julfa must have had an immediate purpose.

From mid-century on, the social unity of New Julfa came to an end. The factor of the resettlement of poorer Armenians from other sectors of Isfahan into the New Julf suburb was neither alone nor the most important change disrupting the unity of New Julfa as it entered the second part of the century. These were two distinct groups: one extremely wealthy, the other quite poor. Their interaction were therefore limited. The impact of Catholicism was more significant. One of the four main families of the suburb was Catholic. Šahrimanean support and funding of foreign Catholic missionaries was the open door for Catholic intrusion into this totally closed community, but this could not have happened without the assent of the *Kalāntar*: “at the time a small present of some curiosity was made to the Head of the Armenians, and the latter was in need of a recommendation for the release of three Armenians from the galleys in Venice.”³³ Again, the commercial ties to Europe were the cause of this overture. Fierce opposition to Catholicism ensued, with numerous demands of support from the Armenians to the Persian

³² *CHOC* vol. 1, p. 364.

³³ *CHOC* vol. 1, p 378.

court, starting with the ousting of the Catholics from the suburb in 1654³⁴. Upon petitions presented by the Armenians themselves, Safavid authorities granted the Armenian notables and Church support against Catholic penetration into New Julfa³⁵. The argument was a legal one, based on the fact that a royal *farmān* granted the Armenians the exclusive right to inhabit New Julfa. They would hold this position until the end of the century. In addition, an element within the Diocese itself caused most of the problems. This very important episode has just been closely studied by V. Ghougassian. After the death of Xač'atur Kesarec'i in 1646, a serious division in the ecclesiastic community of New Julfa occurred which gave way to a power struggle. This contest ended with the appointment of Dawit' Ĵulayec'i in 1652. On that date, the contender, Yakob Ĵulayec'i, left for Armenia, and in 1655 occupied the pontifical seat at Ējmiacin. In retaliation for his loss of New Julfa he wanted to reduce the power of his rival by cutting down the jurisdiction of the Diocese of New Julfa; so he declared Union with Rome for all Iranian Armenians—except those of the Diocese of New Julfa proper³⁶. It seems likely that the Shāh ordered old Julfa destroyed upon the departure of this pro Catholic contender in order to prevent his faction from following him and resettling again in Julfa, in already heavily Catholicized Naxiĵewan. This might otherwise have been an open door for the shāh's subjects to leave the capital for their ancestral home.

Therefore, the opposition to the Catholics among the Armenians of New Julfa mid-century is very different from their initial cordiality to Catholic missionaries at the beginning of the century³⁷. Persian attitudes toward the missionaries had also shifted. From their establishment until about 1635, the Shāh and the Pope in Rome had direct talks of reunion with the Catholic church³⁸. By mid-century, not only had the attitude of the Armenians changed, alarmed since the thirties by what had occurred in Poland³⁹, but that of the Persians themselves. The Persians were no longer interested in Europe or in ties to Rome against the Ottomans. The treaty of 1639 had changed the political landscape. Since he was no

³⁴ *CHOC* vol. 1, p. 379-81.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ GHOUGASSIAN 1995, p. 248.

³⁷ *CHOC* vol. 2, p. 1072.

³⁸ All the elements are discussed at length pp. 86 to 307, see also all the letters of Shāh' Abbās to the Pope and the Pope's responses in Volume 1. The letters of the Shah are grouped in APPENDIX B of volume 2 pp. 1357-1358 contents of these negotiations are discussed in great detail in *CHOC*, vol. 1, pp. 86-307.

³⁹ *CHOC* vol. 1, p 321.

longer embroiled in fighting the Turks, neither did he need to further develop his well-established export trade in silk, ‘Abbās II lost interest in the Europeans. Moreover, there was a different attitude towards the Ottomans—the Shāh even receiving an Ottoman ambassador. They exchanged niceties such as the following: the Ottoman Ambassador inquires why the Shāh does not prevent the Armenians from wearing green the Shāh responds by saying “Let the Sultan keep the dogs from urinating in green grass and I will keep the Armenians from wearing green.”⁴⁰ A very clear token of the high degree of liberty given to the Armenians in their exile is this rare privilege to wear green with impunity. A color strictly reserved to the descendants of the Prophet, no other Moslem was allowed to wear it. The Ottomans seem to have been proud of enforcing this rule thoroughly in their domains with no exceptions made for the Christian Armenians. The Ambassador’s remark was clearly meant as a jibe to demonstrate that Shi’ites were playing loose with the customs of Islam by ignoring this rule within a Christian community. Since the days of Shāh Ismā’il (1501-1524) there had been a shift in the interpretation of jihād, it was no longer directed towards Christians but towards the Sunnī Ottomans enemy⁴¹. Now there was a second shift. While Shāh ‘Abbās II did not accept the twenty-year truce offered by the Ottomans, nevertheless there was a serious diplomatic shift. European allegiance against the Turks was put on the back burner. ‘Abbās II did not make any efforts towards Europe, despite the presence of two European companies on Persian soil he was more preoccupied by his Eastern frontier than the Western. This change created new political complications for the Armenians. Despite this shift in attitude towards Europe by the court, the Armenians were still very tied to Europe by their commercial interests. The point is that the interests of the Safavid court and of its Armenian subjects were no longer as much in harmony as they were when the Shāhs were interested in European allegiance. They had diverged. Armenian overtures to Europe were now out of line with Iran’s foreign policy and would remain so until 1694 when the Persians looked to France—and even Portugal—over the question of Muscat⁴². Until then, Europe held no great significance to Safavid foreign policy, but did remain a constant preoccupation for the Armenian silk traders since Europe was their outlet. As my dissertation has argued, their best customers were in Aleppo and in Italy itself, and therefore were Catholic.

⁴⁰ RICHARD vol. 2. *De Persia 1684*. 1995 p. 238.

⁴¹ AMORETTI 1993 p.632.

⁴² KROELL 1976-77.

Conversion to Catholicism among the Armenians is understandable considering the extent of their mercantile traffic with Catholic Europe, and the leanings of the some of the clergy in New Julfa. Possible motivations for voluntary conversion to Islam were both political and economic. The economic incentive offered by Shiite religious law was compelling. In a commentary on the State of Persia in 1660 addressed to Jean Baptiste Colbert, Raphaël du Mans writes:

Une autre chose qui ruine toutes ces deux Nations est que ces Mores icy ont une loy parmy eux que l'Imon Gafer, qui est un des descendans de Mahomed, a lessé que quiconque des *kafers*, infidelles, quitteroit sa loy pour embrasser le Mahométisme, que tous les biens généralement de ses parens luy soient donné's, de sorte que au jourd'huy un Arménien moura lessant du bien, quelqun de ses parens, quoy que esloigné de 10 générations se sera faict More, par voye de justice il entrera dans les possessions du dit deffunct, par ce seul tiltre qu'il est gravé de la pate du Diable. Cette invention machiavéliste tente beaucoup de personnes de faire un faulx pas, tant pour sauver son bien que pour accrocher celuy d'autrui. Le désir de gagner un proces, un esprit de vengeance, un mescontentement, etc., sont icy les semences de cette yvroye.

Les juges Mores qui aiment mieux un présent qun futur ont enseigné aux Arméniens de se garantir de ce désastre. C'est qu'un Arménien, pour garantir son bien à ses enfans de la griffe de ces loups, vendra aux *kazi* mesme ou à quelque affidé, tout son bien, tant en passera le *kabalé*, marché, etc., en la forme ordinere avec les tesmoins, bulle du *kazi* etc., puis cet affidé par un autre contract revend tout ce bien aux enfans du dit Arménien et en passe le marché juridiquement. Cet Arménien venant à mourir, ces affamés de Mores nouveaux, *gedid el Esloum* se présentent..⁴³.

This device of saving one's fortune by first selling it for the symbolic amount of one 'abāssī to a Moslem judge is found again in Raphaël du Mans' report on the year 1684, two decades later⁴⁴. The law of Imam Ja'far, the sixth Imam, had been put into effect much earlier by Shāh 'Abbās I, a little before his death in 1629. The missionaries in Persia labeled it an "infamous edict." It gave new converts to Islam access to

⁴³ RAPHAËL DU MANS, 1660, 14 verso now reedited in RICHARD, vol. 2, p. 35. The Capuchin is mistaken on the number of generations which according to this shi'ite law are seven and not ten.

⁴⁴ *Alio etiam utuntur Armeni remedio potiori. Dives enim Armenus timens hujusce modi post obitum lites, domum suam nec non liberos depopulantes in vivis adhuc omnia sua bona pro uno Abassi vendit uni Mauro et kasi instrumentum seu codicillum scribit venditionis et attestatur, et hic Maurus, eodem instanti, alio codicillo omnia haec bona filiis hujusce denuo vendit nec in venditione supellectilium species requiritur explicanda, sed generali nomine nuncupanda. Mortuo hoc Armeno, ad prædam accurrit canis renegatus, qui illico hocce baculo, ventre jejuno, cum dedecore abigitur.* in RICHARD vol 2, p. 328.

the entirety of their family's fortune. According to the Carmelites, by 1654 more than 50,000 Christians were "renegades in order to escape beggary."⁴⁵ The date is notable here. In fact, there is little indication that this edict had any immediate effect on New Julfa and the wealthy. There are no conversions recorded under the reign of Shāh Safī (1629-1642). A letter from Fr. Dimas to Rome speaks of privileged relations between the shāh and the Armenians: "the king has shown himself kindly to all Christians, familiar even with the Armenians, he has gone any times to the houses of Khwaje Nazar and other leading men of Julfa to eat in their houses."⁴⁶ It is to be remembered that in Shiite Persia, unlike in the Ottoman Empire, contact with Christians was considered unclean or impure, *najas*, and that in socializing closely with the Armenians Shāh 'Abbās I and Shāh Safī contravened this principle. Tavernier writes that 'Abbās II also dined in the house of the head of the Armenians of New Julfa—traditionally on the occasion of Christmas baptisms performed in the river. He adds that nowhere was it easier to treat a king to a feast than in someone else's house. The custom was that the host would pay the kitchen of the Shāh 20 *tumāns* and that all of the food was prepared in the royal kitchen and a gold service for the table was provided. The Shāh always ate and drank in his own gold tableware which was provided and handled by his own staff⁴⁷. After dinner, a large sum is given to the Shāh as a present. Tavernier was present on two such occasions in New Julfa where the Shāh dined in the house of the *Kalāntar*. Once at a feast for Shāh Safī, then at one given for 'Abbās II. He writes that receiving the Shāh was a great expenditure, but that the wealth of the Armenians could withstand it. Great sums of money were offered to the Shāh in gold basins after the meal. Some sources speak of 'Abbās I casually visiting other people's kitchens, and sharing cups and food with Christians⁴⁸. There are no reports of such casual for his successors. Twenty *tumāns* was a very large sum. The entire trading capital of the peddler Yovhannēs in India amounted to fifty *tumāns*. Although inflation had devaluated money considerably at the end of the century an entire extended family could survive on fifty *tumāns* for a year⁴⁹.

The largest number of conversions probably date from the reign of 'Abbās II. We can hypothesize that, despite the letter in the *Chronicle*,

⁴⁵ *CHOC* vol. 1, p. 288.

⁴⁶ *CHOC* vol 1, p. 308.

⁴⁷ TAVERNIER 1981 vol. 1, pp. 190-91.

⁴⁸ *CHOC* vol 1, p. 169 and 249.

⁴⁹ BAGHDIAantz 1993, p. 78.

the conversions are not simply due to the existence of the law, although some scholars uphold this⁵⁰. The conversions would have taken place twenty years later due to a change in political climate—not in the law. Even the missionary letter states that by that 1654 there were 50,000 converts. That is twenty five years after the law's promulgation. Earlier reports from missionaries dating from the thirties, or the reign of Shāh Safī, make no mention of similar large scale conversions. Economic incentive alone, or greed on the part of close or distant relatives was not sufficient to disrupt the close-knit family structure. The political pressures of the 1650s needed to be coupled to these economic pressures.

The difficulties under Shāh 'Abbās II were amplified under his successor's reign. It was not during his reign that Persian fears of Armenian high treason through allegiance with the Catholic powers reach their height. When Fryer visited New Julfa in 1677, during the reign of Shāh Sulaimān (1666-1694), he wrote of the surveillance exercised on previously all-Armenian New Julfa:

the State for Publick ends thinks it convenient to intersperse *Moores* among them as the *Egyptians* wisely enough did Task Masters among the *Israelites* in the land of *Goshen*, to suppress by a timely foresight, what might prove irremediable by an overgrowing Strength⁵¹.

A letter dated 1665 by Dulaurier Deslandes confirms that there is not a single Moslem in the suburb⁵². This surveillance through Moslem presence was new and it followed one of the most dramatic moments of the diplomatic history of New Julfa. Overtures were made to foreign powers by the Armenians: to the Tsar of Russia Alexander Mikhaelovich, and to Louis XIV of France. That these overtures were made under growing political pressure is clear. Their consequences, however, only created a more difficult situation for the Armenian subjects of the Safavids, since their loyalty could subsequently be questioned. The appeal to Russia and to the King of France, seen by some as part of a move towards "liberation" from subjugation to an Islamic power, had dire consequences of an opposite nature.

The following episode should demonstrate the strong tie between conversion to Islam and an independent foreign policy pursued by the Armenians, which was inadmissible to their Persian hosts. A recent article on New Julfa by the present writer, published in this journal, closes with the conversion to Islam of the head of the Armenian community,

⁵⁰ GHOUGASSIAN 1995, p. 102.

⁵¹ FRYER (John) vol. 2, p. 258.

⁵² KROELL 1979, p. 17.

the *Kalāntar*, in August 24th of the year 1673⁵³. This, however, was the *Kalāntar*'s second conversion. His first conversion had been to Catholicism. In this case Persian, suspicion that conversion signified state treason and allegiance with a foreign power can be documented. In his recent work on Raphaël du Mans, Francis Richard describes a letter signed by the *Kalāntar* of New Julfa and other notables of the suburb to Louis XIV⁵⁴. This letter to Louis XIV was exhibited in a 1996 exhibit at the Bibliothèque nationale in Paris⁵⁵. It was signed by none other than the *Kalāntar*, Āghā Pīrī on the first of December 1671. When he signed the letter to Louis XIV, Āghā Pīrī was Catholic. In a letter by the French Ambassador Noitel which is on the reverse side of the letter to Louis XIV reads:

«Le second juillet, trois marchands arméniens m'ayant fait leurs civilités, l'un d'eux, venu par la caravane, m'a rendu une lettre du Père Raphaël du Mans écrite d'Ispahan le 14 décembre 1671. Il m'informe que l'attestation que je désirais ayant été accordée, la difficulté qu'on a eue n'a point été fondée sur ce que les Arméniens ne crussent point les memes choses que nous sur l'Eucharistie et les autres points dans lesquels ils conviennent, mais sur l'appréhension de leur clergé que le nôtre ne se veuille rendre maître de leur Église; que néanmoins la considération du Kelonter des Julfalins, nommé Agapiri, aussi généreux que civil et honnête, et qui soutient ses bonnes qualités par ses grandes richesses, au dessus de tous ceux de sa nation, dont il est le chef par son rang aussi bien que par son mérite, l'a emporté. Ce seigneur, qui est fort catholique, s'est servi de tous les moyens les plus convenables pour obtenir cette déclaration de la Vérité, à laquelle on s'est déterminé par le respect que l'on a pour le Roy, par l'égard qu'ils ont eu à mes lettres, principalement par celles du grand Patriarche, jointes

⁵³ CHARDIN London 1927, p. 67 "The 24 was a day of affliction for all the Christians of Ispahan and especially the Armenians because of the revolt of their chief or governor named Agha Piri Calentar, that is to say provost of this big suburb of Ispahan where they live. He was a semi-scholar who had read Avicenna and other Arab philosophers as well as Moslem polemicists and could not solve their objections; therefore he was more seduced by the blindness of a spirit of error than by mere voluptuousness.

⁵⁴ RICHARD, vol. 1, p. 86 «La lettre qu'écrivirent l'archevêque David de Jolfâ, l'archevêque Isaac, supérieur de Saint -Thaddée²⁰¹, Mgr. Etienne, supérieur du couvent de la Mère de Dieu, proclamait leur croyance en la Transsubstantiation et ils apposèrent leur sceau. Signèrent aussi les *vartabeds* Michel, Jean Mrk'uz et Jean fils de Buniat, le curé de St.-Bartolomé de Jolfâ, le *kalântar* Aqâ-Piri, son "majordome" Déodat (Astuacatur), Zakarya Diglierat, "Ovannès di Giamal", "Manuel Digiamatum", "Agamal di Thobii", "Agajar di Carnal", Serge fils d'Isaac, disciple d'un *vartabed*, et naturellement Petrus Bédik qui s'intitule "Ecclesiae Armenae doctor". Datée du 10 décembre 1671, il en existe deux copies magnifiquement ornées, conservées aujourd'hui à la Bibliothèque Nationale, sous les cotes *Arménien 145*, dont elle forme les fol. 11-11v et *Arménien 141*. Dans la lettre elle-même, le P. Raphaël est qualifié de «missionnaire âgé et de grande sagesse». Au verso de l'exemplaire *Arménien 141* figure une lettre de Nointel».

⁵⁵ KÉVORKIAN, ed. 1996, p. 191.

à la copie de l'attestation que lui et les Arméniens de Turquie m'ont accordée⁵⁶;

This letter describes Āghā Pīrī as being very Catholic and a channel for French influence. The letter to Louis XIV and the events surrounding it have been described as part of the Armenian liberation movements and the endeavors of Yakob IV for union with Rome⁵⁷. In my previous work, I have argued for the political and religious conservatism of the wealthy traders of the suburb. This entire episode, according to Chardin, had only one immediate consequence: the reform of the Armenian clergy. In this passage the influence of the important merchants of New Julfa is clear:

The important merchants of Julfa laid hold of this Occasion to make pressing instances to their Patriarch, that he would labour in the Reformation of the clergy, and more especially in restraining the loose Manners, and dissolute manners of the Nuns, whose enormous Irregularities were become notoriously Publick and Scandalous, for they were not contented to prostitute themselves, but made it their Business to corrupt others, and carry on the most infamous Intrigues⁵⁸.

The merchants according to Chardin were both conservative, for fear of their position with the Shāhs, and more concerned with reforms within their own Church in order to preserve it against the infringement of Catholicism.

These seemingly unrelated events, conversion to Catholicism by the head of the community in New Julfa, and then to Islam merely two years later, are, as we hope to demonstrate, closely related. These successive conversions suggest that political exigency was a greater factor than spiritual calling. According to Chardin, Āghā Pīrī knew that his conversion to Islam would create unprecedented problems and much aversion among the Armenians, since he was the most prominent member of their community and their leader. Two weeks before his formal apostasy he went to court and begged the Nazir to make it seem like an act committed under violence. To convince the Nazir to help him he not only presented him with 600 ducats but predicted that if his conversion were to be known as a voluntary apostasy, the Armenian merchants who were abroad on business would seize the opportunity to not come back. They would keep their goods and money and settle in Europe and this would cause a great loss⁵⁹. And so it was done: the Nazir approached him and

⁵⁶ RICHARD, vol. 1, p. 87.

⁵⁷ KÉVORKIAN, ed. 1996, in this see the article by KÉVORKIAN pp. 188-196.

⁵⁸ CHARDIN ed. 1927, p. 69-70.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 67.

said very loudly, "the Shāh orders you to become Moslem, he must be contented."⁶⁰ It is interesting to note here that the reason he wishes his conversions to seem forced are economic. Losing goods to factors who would settle in Europe. Āghā Pīrī, given the name Muhammad Pīrī after conversion, was not only the *Kalāntar* of New Julfa, but one of the richest merchants in the country. Chardin writes that he owned a fortune greater than 2,000,000 pounds, and that the Moslems considered his conversion a great victory⁶¹.

On the 9th, the Nazir, with one of his Brothers, and one of the King's Favourites, went in the Morning to the Prevost's of *Julfa*, who had turn'd *Mahometan*. A great many of the most considerable of the Clergy had likewise repaired thither; it was in order to Circumcise him. One of the Domes-tick Chirurgions of the Great Pontif performed the Operation in a Closet adjoining to the great Hall, where the Assembly was. They gave him the Name of *Mahammed Peri* at his Circumcision; after which he was immediately put into a Bagnio; when he came out of it, he was cloathed with white Garments that were new. While this Ceremony was performing, the Assembly offer'd up their Thanks to Heaven for the Conversion of so illustrious a Neophyte, and a thousand Vows for that of all the Christians of *Persia*, and for the Exaltation of *Mahometanism*. Two Hours after, the Company was entertain'd at a great Dinner, which was brought from the House of *Aga Zaman*, Intendant to the King's Mother, because the Family of the new Convert not being yet become *Mahometans*, what-ever had been provided therein, would have been polluted. This *Aga Zaman* gave him his Daughter in Marriage a Month after. Circumcision is very painful to those that are advanc'd in Years, who are commonly a Fortnight or Three Weeks before they Can walk⁶².

It is to be noted that the feast took place at the Queen Mother's, patron of Julfa since the time of Shāh 'Abbās. The former *Kalāntar* is married within the family of a high officer of the Queen Mother's household. As discussed earlier this is the household which collects the revenues of New Julfa and protects its interests.

The source which contradicts Chardin's testimony is the narrative of the Armenian traveler Petros Bedik⁶³. Petros Bedik had passed some time with the *Kalāntar* and was part of the project of Union. One of its main instigators, he is also a signatory of the letter to the King of France. He writes that the Shāh threatened the *Kalāntar* with death but promised him great rewards if he converted. He adds as a good Catholic would,

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*,

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 68.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 79s.

⁶³ BEDIK 1678, p. 316.

that the *Kalāntar* was blinded by the devil. So according to Bedik his conversion was forced. Francis Richard notes the difference between Chardin's and Bedik's versions and seems to side with Bedik, because he believes that, because of the Protestant Chardin's hostility towards Catholicism, he feels a malicious thrill at reporting the fact that the conversion was voluntary. One must agree that Chardin writes rather gleefully that those most tricked in this whole affair were the Capuchins responsible for his conversion to Catholicism⁶⁴. To the present writer, another element of a more dangerous and immediate nature seems to confirm Bedik's version of forced conversion. Seeking allegiance to European power such as France, or submitting to Rome, was tantamount to high treason in the eyes of the Persian court, especially coming from the head of the community. It might have been the only solution which sufficed to satisfy the court of Armenian loyalty.

The general climate of persecution against the Armenians of Julfa and the economic difficulties which were the underlying causes of an appeal to Europe are only partially described by passages in the *Chronicle of Carmelites*. A letter dated 27-4-1671, a few month before the letter to Louis XIV, reads:

In this connexion a bishop or Vartapet of the Armenians having publicly become a Muslim, *from that time onwards* with one accord in the streets they call out after all Christians and Religious: 'Dog! become a Muslim': and the little children in the streets shout 'Cursed be the Franks'. The chief Armenian archimandrites have been put into dungeons with irons on their legs, and the churches in Julfa have been condemned to pay 400 Tumans every year (1 Tuman=15 piastres). This persecution of the Armenians and the ill-treatment of the 'Franks'-even of an officer of the king of France!- who do not dare to appear at the "Court, and are treated by the masters of this country like dogs, and cursed for blackguards and rogues, has put fear into the vitals of all the Religious.... Blessed be God, who has permitted that this chief minister, the cruel persecutor of Christians, has been recently disgraced...."⁶⁵

A voluntary conversion to Islam seems to have opened the gate to a series of events which ended up with many notable of New Julfa converting to Islam. This taxation was brought about by the revenge of a disgruntled Armenian ecclesiastic. The unnamed *Vardapet* in the above quotation was a new convert by the name of Yohan. His ambitions for promotion having been thwarted by his own church, he converted to Islam to gain a new avenue for political power. He managed to convey

⁶⁴ RICHARD vol. 1, p. 89-90.

⁶⁵ *CHOC*, vol. 1, pp. 406-407.

to the Shāh the idea that the Armenian churches were very rich in gold and silver and that it would be profitable to tax them⁶⁶. The unprecedented taxation was a direct consequence of his personal political ambition, he hoped no doubt to endear himself to the court by indicating this new opportunity for extortion of revenue.

It is not difficult to imagine that faced with both taxation and persecution the Armenians of New Julfa, and chiefly the *Kalāntar* responsible for their affairs (*Āghā Pīrī*), would look for allegiance outside Persia, despite the danger this entailed. Events which seemed to threaten the position of the community had already begun to unfold.

That there had been later developments as regards the Armenians is indicated in a letter to the Sac. Congregation from the Superior of the Capuchins at Isfahan, Fr. Raphaël du Mans. For one matter, the prohibition of Shāh ‘Abbās II’s reign had been revived in or about 1673:

our (Capuchin) Fathers, as also the Carmelites and Augustinians, have remained in the City, and the king did not order them to leave it, as he had done to the Armenians, whom he has even prohibited from coming into it to sell their wares: this bigotry of the Persians has been daily increasing, and the political favor, which formerly used to attend the Armenians, has altogether melted away and disappeared: and only self-interest has kept them from dealing with the Franks⁶⁷.

The French were very awkward at establishing themselves commercially in Persia and had no presence there until the very end of the century. Armenian appeals to Rome and to the King of France came at a time when the only Catholic within Persia presence was the few missionaries. As the quotation above attests the missionaries themselves, quite unprotected, were at the mercy of the authorities. If indeed it was a move for liberation through union with Rome it was made at a time when the few Catholics in Persia were politically isolated.

Most strikingly, it seems *Āghā Pīrī* did not convert alone in 1673. “It having been reported by Cardinal Nino that the king of Persia had caused more than twenty of the chief Armenian merchants living in Julfa to become renegades.”⁶⁸ It does strike the reader as odd: it would mean all of New Julfa was officially converted to Islam. Although he provides no details as to the identities of the twenty merchants, one can not unreasonably surmise that they were the very same twenty chief merchants

⁶⁶ *TĒR YOVHANEANC’*, volume 2, pp. 258-59. For a fuller description of this episode see BAGHDIAantz 1993 chap. I.

⁶⁷ *CHOC*, vol 1, p. 407.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

who signed the treaty with Tsar Alexei Mikhaïlovich in that very same year of 1673. Since these were heads of households and the most important members of the suburb, it nominally makes the suburb Muslim. The fact, however, that these conversions were attributed to the absence of a Catholic bishop at Babylon makes one suspicious of the intent of the missionary's reporting. Could he be amplifying the situation so as to obtain a speedy response to the vacancy from Rome? No other sources, including the contemporary Chardin, who would have been there physically at this date, reports this mass conversion to Islam. In addition to this problem there is confusion in the sources as to the succession of the *kalāntars*.

Grigor Lucikov was the head of the delegation to Russia. In 1671 when the list was made, names of the twenty head merchants is topped by the name of the *Kalāntar* of New Julfa, which is given as Astuacatur Miričenc⁶⁹. A treaty with non-Catholic Russia was certainly more acceptable to the Persian court, which at the time was accepting Russia's overtures despite the conduct and appearance of the ambassadors of Muscovy to Isfahan⁷⁰. For reasons unclear to us Āghā Pīrī succeeds Astuacatur, if indeed the former was *Kalāntar*. One source, the work of the Catholic Petros Bedik, never names him. Bedik was in Isfahan since 1670⁷¹. According to him, Āghā Pīrī had been *Kalāntar* since 1667.

Only five years later, in 1678, drought, crop failure and the high price of corn were the occasion for terrible abuse from a religiously fanatic faction who accused the Armenians and the Jews of countering their prayers for rain by their very existence. They brought to "naught their national religious rites with alien sacrileges."⁷² They convinced the Shāh to take brutal action against them. The general climate of hostility toward non-Muslims had dire consequences for other minorities, which far surpassed the ill-treatment of the Armenians. It seems the Armenians were saved by the intervention of an unnamed "grandee".

⁶⁹ For this treaty see pp. 28-29. There are problems concerning the dates of the *kalāntar*'s of New Julfa: According to the letter to Louis XIV, it was Āghā Pīrī who was the head of the community in december 1671, Petros Bedik says he was *kalāntar* since 1667, Who is this Astuacatur of the treaty with the Tsar? He is given as the *kalāntar* preceeding Agha Piri by Xač'ikian, with the dates 1660-1671. It seems therefor that Bedik is mistaken to think that Āghā Pīrī was *kalāntar* since 1667 and directly succeeded the last *kalāntar* of the Shafraz family, this he excludes Astuacatur entirely. Also see footnote 77 below.

⁷⁰ MATTHEE 1994 offers the best summary of Russo-Persian relations in the seventeenth century.

⁷¹ RICHARD 1995, p. 85.

⁷² CHOC vol. 1, p. 408.

“So the Shah, not in possession of his wits, admitting as a serious crime what he had heard exaggerated by the pretended sincerity of the false accusers, orders on the 10th ‘day of the month of May’ (1678) ‘those of the Jews, whose flight could be forestalled, to be’ seized and, with a hasty sentence of his furious temper, that the abdomens of their principal ‘men should be ripped open-which was at once put into execution. The bellies of the’ Rabbi or priest of the Hebrews and of two of their chief men having been split open, they ‘perished: and their corpses, thrown out into the great royal square, called the Maidan, lay’ for a week unburied, while for a burial permit a tax of four Tumans was being levied for ‘each. Then for the rest of them’ (the Jews) ‘fetters and chains were waived on payment’ of a fine of 600 Tumans (one Tuman is 15 scudi, or piastres).’ But the Armenians, who were involved in the same accusation and were in peril of being’ generally slaughtered, having a certain grandee to protect them with the king, obtained ‘pardon by paying some hundreds of Tumans as the price of their remaining unharmed.’ As a cloak for the deed the tale was bruited abroad that sorceries had been devised for ‘the destruction of the king and the kingdom, to wit on the road leading to Shiraz the’ skull of a living ass, which going up and down the road, with flames pouring out of it ‘from light lit inside, was carrying about a dry gourd scooped out, in which there was a’ small cat: and this, when it died, the king’s death and other similar disasters would follow”⁷³.

Could the grandee in question have been Muhammad Pīrī, now integrated into the Queen Mother’s household? It is clear through his arranged matrimony that the rewards promised by the Shāh upon his conversion were not simply of a material nature as Āghā Pīrī was enormously wealthy to begin with, political office is more likely, as his marriage into a high-ranking family in the Safavid administration indicates. There seems to be clear indication in the fact that Muhammad Pīrī rose even higher and was made mint master in 1692. The information that a certain Hājji Pīrī, called a renegade Armenian by the Dutch factor whose letter is kept in the VOC archives⁷⁴, was the new mint master (*mu‘āyyir al-mammālik*), was a cause for optimism for the Dutch. They claimed he was a skilled merchant, and this caused great hope for a revival of commerce. Unfortunately, his great age forced him to resign in March of the same year and he died a month later⁷⁵. The title of *hājji*, acquired through pilgrimage to Mecca, should not mislead us. The dates and details all speak for the fact that the Hājji Pīrī in the Dutch letter was the *ex-Kalāntar* of New Julfa. Francis Richard furnishes a short genealogy

⁷³ CHOC, vol. 1, p. 408.

⁷⁴ VOC 1507, Gambroon to Heren XVII, Aug. 2, 1693, folio 469 cited in MATTHEE p. 322.

⁷⁵ MATTHEE 1991 p. 322.

of the *Kalāntar* based on the colophon of an illuminated manuscript dated 1654⁷⁶. He could have easily been an old man in 1692, thirty-eight years later.

Āghā Pīrī, or later Mohammad Pīrī was not the only *Kalāntar* to convert to Islam in this period. Kaempfer, in describing the kidnapping of 22 young Armenian girls in 1683, writes of the then current Armenian *Kalāntar*, Khwāja Awetis, as an atheist. Later in the same text he says Khwāja Lucas succeeded Awetis in 1693, the former having converted to Islam and who then wore the name Muhammed Husain Beg⁷⁷. The twenty girls were taken into the harem and thus converted. Their conversions would jeopardize the fortunes of their Armenian families.

The two cases of conversions by two *Kalāntars* show a pattern in which the inner strife between Catholicism and the Apostolic church as well as other factional fights within the community led to the voluntary conversions of the politically ambitious, who, having lost battles on their own turf, resorted to integrating within the more powerful Muslim hierarchy. The conversions of Āghā Pīrī were examined at length. Below are the political motives for the second *Kalāntar* mentioned above:

Vartapet John, accusing him of being a Catholic because he used to have communication with us, the Vartapet in question joined that Kalantar (Aviet) who the previous year had been removed from his office by the animosity of the schismatic bishop and who, to escape his enemy, had professed Muhammadanism; and they plotted the ruin of the common enemy⁷⁸.

⁷⁶ RICHARD 1995 vol. 1 p. 85 note 199. The manuscript in question is called Smith Lesouëf in provenance from New Julfa kept at the Bibliothèque nationale.

⁷⁷ RICHARD 1995 vol 1, p. 281, note 395. These dates found in Bedik and sources are important in trying to clarify the dates of succession of the *kalāntars* of New Julfa. They are in contradiction with some of the information elsewhere and used by scholars. An initial list is published by XAČ'IKYAN 1988 p. 30 has been modified by GHOUGASSIAN, p. 82. However, we must disagree with the date given as 1671 for the conversion of Āghā Pīrī to Islam by Ghoukassian, and with the date given for *Kalāntar* Łukas accession given as 1692, which the information in the Carmelites would place in 1693, as well as Kaempfer.

⁷⁸ CHOC vol 1, p. 468 "They accused him[bishop Stephen] of having had the Quran translated into Armenian with a refutation of it, and other books attacking the Muhammadan religion. For this he was summoned to the inquisitory tribunal of that faith and, convicted on the evidence of 30 Muhammadan witnesses who swore to this, he was condemned to be burnt alive. The Queen Mother protected him, however, and demanded that execution of the sentence should be suspended. We are awaiting the outcome of this and our own re-establishment in Julfa: for this we have some hope from the grandees of the country, to whom we have represented the injustice done to us, and the vengeance on the Armenians that our indignant princes may perhaps take. This has made a great impression on the Qurchi-bashi, i.e. general of the old militia: and on this 'account he has blamed the precipitate sentence of the Diwan Baigi: in fact the latter has 'repented the deed in such a way that one of his familiars has related to us that he (the Diwan Baigi) had said he

As the following passage illustrates political ambition and integration into the society they lived in was not the least incentive for conversion. In a small community it could have dire consequences, as was the case with the voluntary conversion of the *Vardapet* who advocated taxing the churches in 1671. There is also the fact that the Armenians had lived there for two generations and that the most ambitious among them might have wanted to join the ranks of privilege outside the walls of the suburb as the following passage (observed circa 1677) illustrates. The Armenians had been given all liberties save one:

for he [Shāh Abbas I] distinguished them neither in Habit, Excise, or Custom, from his own *Persians*, only excepting in one thing, small and inconsiderable in its self, being but an exterior piece of Honour; for it is not lawful, even for those of the best Rank, to Ride into *Spahau*n with their Servants bearing after them their *Goleons*, or Glass Vessels, out of which they Smoak Tobacco, by a long Reed, or Cane, fixed into Golden, Silver, or Brass Heads, with other Magnificent Appendices, carried stately behind them, invented to signalize Men of better Fortune among them; and only forbid the *Armenians*; whereby letting them know, however Blessed they are with this World's Goods, yet they were to appear in the Royal City only as Merchants: Which thing, how silly and trivial it is in reality, and to Wise Men is but an wholesome Admonition, yet it has been but too often the ground of Apostatizing from their Heavenly Institution⁷⁹.

Tobacco was not a small matter in Persia. Introduced by the Portuguese, it was banned by Shāh 'Abbās. Three decades after the ban was lifted, *circa* 1660, Du Mans writes that it was used by everyone: rich and poor, women and children alike⁸⁰. More unusual to the twentieth-century reader is the symbolic importance of the water pipe used to smoke tobacco as a token of rank. As Fryer explains, the ornate neck of the bottle denoted rank: the more richly ornate, the higher the rank. In Paris in 1715 the French Court much remarked on the water pipe which everywhere accompanied the Persian ambassador, who smoked it ceaselessly⁸¹. To apostatize in order to have your *qalyān* carried on horseback, as is noted here, seems extreme, were it not for the knowledge that it signified entrance into the privileged ranks of the Safavid grandees.

feared retribution might fall on his house for what he has done to ours. We hope, therefore, that he will return to us the writing (document), by which 'we can re-establish ourselves in Julfa. 'Itimad-ud-Dauleh', i.e. the Grand Wazir, received 'with much benevolence the petition that I presented him for the king in this connection'.

⁷⁹ FRYER 1909-1912, p. 259.

⁸⁰ RICHARD vol 2 1995, p. 105.

⁸¹ HERBETTE 1907.

Voluntary conversions of a political kind were coupled with those of an economic nature. Converting in order to appropriate family wealth, or to preserve it if someone was already attempting to take it away. As argued elsewhere, trade in New Julfa was run by associated extended families⁸². The impact of conversions could be very grave for a group engaged in a common commercial contract. Infighting was the most serious element of decline. The other factor was the conversion of both male and female children taken into the Harem by the Shāh⁸³. These converts were entitled to the wealth of their families, and had, in addition, strong ties to the ruling class through marriage or servitude. The twenty-two abovementioned Armenian girls are also discussed in the letters of the Carmelites. Their forced conversion to Islam jeopardized the fortunes of their families.

One example of infighting will suffice here: the famous 1688 treaty of the Armenians with the English East India Company which Mesrop Seth had decried as the death knell of Armenian commerce⁸⁴. This treaty was signed in London by three people: Sir Joshua Child for the Company; Khoja Panos Callendar, an eminent Armenian merchant residing in London at the time; and Jean Chardin who was acting as agent for the Armenians. Ferrier has previously demonstrated Seth to be wrong: the treaty did not affect the English nor the Armenians. In a new study he elaborates on Armenian reluctance to get involved with the English⁸⁵, with evidence such as the conversion to Islam of one of the major families involved, the Surhad (Shahrimanian or Šahrimanian family), who demanded exclusive rights for themselves. Jean Chardin, when consulted, at the time living in London, was unable to comprehend these developments among the Armenian merchants⁸⁶. His trip in the 1670s had not exposed him to that much divisiveness among the merchants. The problems at the end of the century deserve a study of their own. Suffice it here to note the conversion of two prominent members of the Šahrimanian families as the best examples of conversion for economic reasons.

⁸² BAGHDIAZT 1993 chapter III.

⁸³ We dwell at length on this in a forthcoming article on the women of New Julfa.

⁸⁴ SETH 1983.

⁸⁵ FERRIER 1996, p. 16. The Armenians found it totally unprofitable to take the silk down to Isphahan and give it to the English factors. They bought it in the Northern silk producing regions and took it directly to Aleppo to sell to many groups of merchants Italian, French English and even Dutch. They were reluctant to give the English any kind of monopoly.

⁸⁶ FERRIER 1996, pp. 15-18.

This was in 1699: as to the money in Venice a report, undated,' on the Sar-rat or Shariman family to the Sacr. Congregation in Rome, where one of them was at the time, was to the effect that: 'in Isfahan they have 50 domestics, 100 employees in their merchants' business. Because 'one of them had unfortunately become a Muslim and, when his relatives die, all their 'estate will have to go to him, they think of establishing themselves in Christendom and 'putting part of the family there: and so they have transferred to Venice 200,000 scudi, for '100,000 to be employed in that city, the rest in Rome with the approval of the Sacr. 'Congregation...

The money placed in Venice was invested in banks there. They were championed by the Catholic Bishop of Isfahan, Elias, and backed by the other Orders in Isfahan, so that they always enjoyed the esteem of the Roman Curia. With their extensive trading relations in Venice and Leghorn the Šahrimeanean family had not only been granted freedom from customs at Ancona but citizenship in Rome as well. They were also ennobled as "Counts of the Holy Roman Empire" and appear frequently in letters so named: "Conte Marcar", "Conte Stefano," including those family members resident in Isfahan. Transferring money out of Iran however seems to not have been a sufficient measure against losing their fortune to the convert in the family—the main heads of the family themselves had to convert a few month later in order to preserve their fortunes:

"There is nothing to be hoped of the two Sharimans, who in the month of December last became Muhammadans... in this evil and wicked country the son of Khwajeh Markar must become a Muhammadan, when his father dies, so that he may get his father's money, and the same will be the case with Khwajeh Michael... but they have now to say whether they prefer to die with or without that money. I do not want to see the fathers die, lest I should see the sons remain without divine life".

Markar Šahriman not long afterwards migrated to Venice himself and seems to have remained there for the rest of his life. "Perhaps in order to escape from practice of the religion forced on him,"⁸⁷ and to live as a Christian, Michael's sons were established at Leghorn⁸⁸. When, many years later, the last of a branch of the family which had left for Bengal died without any heirs, they left 100,000 rupees to the convent of San Lazzaro⁸⁹.

The commercial difficulties the Armenians began experiencing at the end of the century stemmed from political origins. The stronger external pressures upon them grew, the more infighting resulted. There was a

⁸⁷ *CHOC* vol 1, p. 486.

⁸⁸ *CHOC* vol. 1, pp 485-87.

⁸⁹ *CHOC* vol. 2, p. 1362.

shift in the foreign policy of Iran after allegiance with European powers ceased to have the importance it earlier had. The Armenians, constant visitors to Europe, became as suspect as the Catholic Europeans themselves, especially after the 1671 letter. Russia was a more acceptable ally. Although the treaty of 1673 was an Armenian initiative, it was more acceptable to the Persians⁹⁰. Time would later demonstrate that perceived allegiance with Russia would prove the more dangerous one for Iranian Armenians.

Fryer writes in the 1670s that most Frenchmen admitted into Iran at that time were Calvinists⁹¹. Chardin, writing in the same period, says that most European visitors were considered spies and that "Ministers of State know no more what passes in Europe, than in the world of the Moon. The Greatest part have even but a confused Idea of Europe, which they look upon to be some little Island in the North Seas."⁹² This is in sharp contrast to Shāh 'Abbās I who was by many accounts very well informed about European affairs⁹³.

The breakdown of royal authority over governors and local officials is another problem with which the merchants had to contend. The *farmāns* issued all strive to protect the merchants from the abuses they knew on the roads. Money was forcibly taken from them on the roads which were no longer safe. Officials in charge of taxation were corrupt. Du Mans, in 1684, writes of the *Rāhdārs* responsible for the roads that they have become a bunch of thieves⁹⁴, which contrasts with his description of them in 1660 as orderly and law-abiding. Although we can only touch on them here, these elements are significant in the decline of commercial enterprise. The general economic state within Iran was in shambles from the seventies on. A recent study, which unfortunately ignores the Armenians and their role, reconstructs the decline of the Iranian economy based on the letters of Dutch factors preserved in the archives of the VOC⁹⁵. My own research has argued for the role the Armenians played in this decline, indirectly by gradually transferring the center of their commerce elsewhere, but principally by no longer importing to Persia the quantities of silver which they had formerly brought⁹⁶.

⁹⁰ MATTHEE 1994.

⁹¹ FRYER 1909-1912, vol. 2 p. 253.

⁹² CHARDIN ed. 1927, p. 195.

⁹³ CHOC vol 1, p. 287

⁹⁴ RICHARD 1995 vol. 2, p. 321 as opposed to the account in *Estat de la Perse en 1660* p. 190.

⁹⁵ MATTHEE 1991.

⁹⁶ BAGHDIAANTZ 1993.

Conversion to Islam certainly created division, family strife, impoverishment for some, sudden fortune for others, and reason for exile for those attached to their faith. There was such aversion to Catholicism in some quarters that certain *Vardapets* advocated conversion to the religion of the “*têtes blanches*,” as du Mans calls Shi’ite Islam, rather than joining “the Franks.”⁹⁷ Here, despite four prominent cases of conversion to Islam, beginning in the 1650s, nothing is said in any of the sources about commercial decline in that period. The best argument that money and religion are of two different worlds is that the fifties, considered a time of high prosperity, were a very divisive time with quarrels within the church, a pro-Catholic faction, a notable converting to Islam and most of the Armenian community under religious pressure from the Safavid authorities. That religion and economy had a clear link in the Armenian commercial mind is also apparent. Commerce ruled. However difficult the religious atmosphere of the nineties became, the Šahrīmānians saved their fortune, demonstrating a decided preference for the here and now, by converting to Islam. Plural identities, Catholic when in Rome, staunch opponent to Catholicism when back in Isfahan are a constant complaint the missionaries record with regard to the Armenians. The travelers and missionaries complain of the lack of religious commitment they see. Fryer wrote of the Armenian merchants that “they only have as much religion as serves their turn and prefer the pleasures and pomp of this life, short and uncertain as they are before those more permanent and the assurance of life to come.”⁹⁸ One can easily argue that their very long history of being wedged between two dominant powers, powers inimical to each other, had given them a good grasp of the necessities of political expediency.

Economic perils caused by conversion to Islam was also a constant factor which impoverished the suburb, but that religion was the sole factor in the decline of New Julfa is an oversimplification. The breakdown of the central government in the late Safavid period too was a contributing factor in the decline of international trade. Extortion by officials at every level made trading a profitless venture. *Farmāns* ordering *rāhdārs* and governors of provinces to respect the correct procedures with the Armenians are found for the reign of Shāh Safī (1629-42). From mid-century on until the next century, with the *farmāns*⁹⁹ of Karīm Khān-i

⁹⁷ RICHARD vol. 1, p. 189.

⁹⁸ FRYER 1909-1912 vol 2, p. 260.

⁹⁹ Most of the *Farmāns* kept at the All Saviours Museum in New Julfa have been published in one form or another, many of them concerning the Armenian settlement were

Zand and Nādir Shāh, one does not find *farmāns* which extend such protections. Although it is problematical to argue from the absence of such documents in the second half of the seventeenth century, it can nevertheless be mentioned to further stress the importance of knowing the Safavid context when analyzing the situation of the Armenians under their rule. The principal cause of New Julfa's decline was political. The privilege they had was tied to the power of the Queen Mother and the ghulām faction. After 1645 the political situation shifts at the detriment of this faction, and therefore of New Julfa.

For the Armenians of New Julfa, surviving political change meant to being capable of assuming multiple identities, so they could blend into the many worlds within which they had to live. The third generation in New Julfa had lost, through political circumstances, some of the privileges its grandfathers had obtained from a different set of contingencies. Interaction with the Catholics and Europe because of their trade led to political overtures at a time when Persia was not interested in European allegiance, overtures which were in great part responsible for generating apprehension of the Armenians among the Safavid authorities. As for augmented taxation and religious strife, the infighting Armenians have to bear responsibility. Taxation and religious strife were in turn responsible to a degree for the decline of New Julfa, though the economic situation of Persia as a whole has to be taken into account. Factors such as the loss of control over local officials, the taxes on minting money and other major factors have never been mentioned in relation to the decline of New Julfa, let alone studied. Unfortunately the sole dissertation on the economic situation in Persia at the end of the century does not examine the role of the Armenians in the Persian economy. In the decline of the trading network of New Julfa, conversion to Islam remains a major factor of social and economic disunity in a field of so many unknowns yet to be explored by further research.

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